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# Changing Media Ecologies in Thailand: Women's Online Participation in the 2013/2014 Bangkok Protests

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Traditionally marginalized groups now have more access to new and unconventional means to participate in politics, transforming the media ecologies of existing political environments. Contemporary feminist scholarship has centered on how women use new media technologies to serve political agendas. However, this literature focuses predominantly on women in the West, while women in developing countries, or Asia more generally, have been largely excluded from analysis. This article aims to fill this gap by examining Thai women's online activities during the 2013/2014 Bangkok political protests. Specifically, we ask how the rise of social and digital media has altered what it means to participate politically in the context of Thai women's present-day political experience. To answer this question we looked at how women resorted to various digital and social media to discuss women's rights and political issues, including Yingluck Shinawatra's political leadership as Thailand's first female prime minister (2011-2014). Moving beyond traditional notions of participation, we argue that there is a need to recognize the emerging dynamics of women's online engagement in the political landscape of Thailand. In the context of a totalitarian state, speaking out against the ruling authority online embodies an additional layer of citizen resistance, a feature of digital life that is often taken for granted in Western democracies.

**Keywords:** Bangkok Protests; Digital Activism; Media Ecologies; Participatory Politics; Yingluck Shinawatra

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## INTRODUCTION

Emerging social and digital media practices have increased the interest concerning the use of digital technologies for political and civic engagement. For some researchers, this has meant a re-evaluation of what it means to engage politically in the digital era. Scholars have asked whether earlier ideas about political participation from the pre-digital age can still be applied to new forms of participation today. They also question whether a rethinking is required around how political participation has developed over time and altered in the light of the changes instigated by online technologies. These questions sit at the heart of much recent literature on social movements, which has often privileged major mass mobilizations, such as those that began in 2011 in the Arab world (Alterman, 2011; Bruns, Highfield, & Burgess, 2013; Daoudi & Murphy, 2011; Harlow & Guo, 2014; Khondker, 2011; Lim, 2012).

Those who have engaged with the Arab movements highlighted predominantly the experiences of young men, or men more generally, and disregarded the political experiences of women. Researchers who have concentrated on women, specifically focused on women in the West (boyd, 2011; Harris, 2008; Keller, 2012), while the experiences of women in non-Western countries have been largely overlooked. Hence, this article seeks to fill this gap in research by discussing women's online political participation in Asia, with a particular focus on Thailand. It is designed to contribute to emerging ideas of digital participation through its analysis of Thai women's online political engagement. We are interested in understanding the extent to which feminist-inspired approaches (Harris, 2008; Keller, 2012) toward the nature of participation are applicable in the Thai case. Despite the diverse and highly complex political conditions in Asia today, we want to explore the relevance of existing research on women's online political participation for women in non-Western contexts. We ask: How has the rise of social and digital media altered what it means to participate politically, particularly in the context of Thai women's political experiences and online practices?

Up to date, there have been only a few studies that examine women's online participation in Thailand (see Balassiano & Pandi, 2013; Enteen 2005). However, there has been a strong interest on the broader issue of political engagement in Thai protests, which provides useful methodological approaches to analyzing online content (Nyblade, O'Mahony, & Sinpeng, 2015). Other studies have looked at the role of physical and virtual spaces in fostering civic society (Balassiano & Pandi, 2013). With regard to the online practices of women, Enteen (2005) examined how Thai women responded to oppressive images through online discussion forums. This latter study found that Thai women were able to use online forums to subvert stereotypes of themselves as highly sexual and subservient to Western men. It revealed that online forums facilitated these women's discussions, enabling Thai women to speak out in ways they would not have been able to without the Internet. As the author notes, "their participation create(s) new communities with constituents which extend the borders of the nation while reducing the power of national images" (Enteen, 2005, p. 477).

Enteen's research offers an early snapshot of the digital ways in which Thai women resisted gendered categories like sex worker and housewife. More recent studies similarly discussed the ways in which Thai women have negotiated their online sexual and gender identities (Pimpawun et al., 2013). Yet, neither Thai scholars nor others in the West have paid attention to Thai women's emerging forms of political participation in Thailand's digital space. By contrast, the more general issue of women's online political participation has gathered widespread interest among Western scholars. Their findings indicate that digital technologies have provided marginalized women in the West with alternative and unconventional avenues for political expression (boyd, 2011; Harris, 2008; Keller, 2012; Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007). In other words, the Internet offers a different means for women to engage with political issues beyond the traditional structures of political engagement. We further assert that the digital environment is unconventional insofar as the political aspects of online participation resist being captured in traditional definitions of politics (e.g., voting, political party membership). Furthermore, we found that the political dimensions of

this participatory culture continue to be underestimated in existing theorizations of social and digital media.

It is in this spirit of analysis that we consider how new notions of participation might have relevance for Thai women's online engagement in political issues. Our study on women's participatory politics in Thailand seeks to determine what forms of online political participation exist among Thai women in Thailand. We draw on insights from feminist activism in other parts of the world in order to explore how new definitions of participation bear on the forms of online political participation emerging among Thai women today. As we will show, online forms of participation of Thai women qualify as feminist as they advance feminist goals, which include a recognition of the ways in which women become politically conscious and active. By applying these definitions of participation to Thai women's online activities, we have been able to take a closer look at a range of Thai women's political experiences and expressions. This has allowed us to consider the different ways in which women engage in protests in a country where access to politics and freedom of speech is still largely restricted.

Postill and Pink (2012) assert that social media platforms have created new sites for collaborative and participatory politics. They illustrate how Internet users engage in multiple platforms, devices, and mediums. This plurality of engagement requires a concept of sociality that recognizes the multiplicity and hybridity of the digital landscape and enables researchers to understand social media practices and their "relatedness in online and offline relationships" (Postill & Pink, 2012, p. 132). By lending on Postill and Pink's notion of the multiplicity of the digital landscape, we account for alternative and unconventional sites of engagement. Hence, we deviate from former definitions of participation developed prior to the 'Internet revolution'. Verba and Nie (1972, pp. 2-3), for example, define political participation as the behavior that affects policy and political processes. They exclude what they consider as "passive acts", such as activities that lie outside the sphere of government (e.g., civil disobedience or violence). Hence, they do not include actions such as protest activities, the shaping of people's political attitudes by their peers, or any expressions of support for or disapproval of political issues.

Critics have been quick to fault such definitions of participation as too narrow. Harris (2004, 2008), for instance, asserts that notions of political participation which define participation exclusively within the confines of formal politics are too restrictive. We suggest that such notions limit the ability to understand women's participatory behavior in environments where media ecologies are recognized as increasingly interrelated, overlapping, and woven into the political and social fabric of society. Opening up the definition of participation to incorporate unconventional sites and means of participating in political discussions has allowed us to assess the range of ways in which women share, engage in dialogue, and influence one another through their online practices and activities. These alternative forms of participation constitute a new dynamic of engagement in women's contribution to the political landscape in Thailand, and contain theoretical implications for engaging with complex and changing media ecologies, including the broader spheres of women's political participation and digital political communication in Asian contexts.

### THEORIZING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The rise of social and digital media has forced scholars to re-conceptualize what it means to participate politically. Recent perspectives on participation emphasize the role of social and digital media in contemporary global mass events (Daoudi & Murphy, 2011; Harlow & Guo, 2014). For instance, research on the use of digital technologies reveals the need to understand participation from the perspective of technology-enabled events and altered political and social landscapes (Bruns et al., 2013; Chambers, 2013; Harris, 2008; Vromen, 2011). For some scholars, regardless of the digital space, the participation of individuals is inextricably tied to the political environment. In these contexts, the research emphasis lies on the relationship between people and the state, rather than people and technologies (Morozov, 2011). For others, the focus lies on 'practice' or the different kinds of activities that occur around new technologies (Pink, 2001). Some researchers of the digital highlight the need to see the interactions these technologies enable, not only as having *mass* appeal, but also as a distinctive *social* phenomenon (Goggin & Crawford, 2011; Hinton & Hjorth, 2013). Morozov (2011) offers similar views on political participation in the context of digital media, although he cautions against those whom he accuses of holding steadfast to a cyber-utopian worldview and equating technology with democracy. For others, technology has been embraced as an emancipatory force that ushers in revolutions that can topple tyrannical dictatorships (e.g., Castells, 2012; Khondker, 2011). In such instances, participation in the political sphere is overlooked in favor of the enabling functions of technology, which are often regarded as a panacea.

Researchers like Lim (2012) and Alterman (2011), depart from such perspectives, choosing to see technology as neutral and arguing that it is the people using the technology who determine its power and potential. In their argument, they therefore underscore the power of Internet users in the political process. Technology is seen to advance social change only through its impact on social institutions and cultural domains. Analyzed from this perspective, people's online activities and multiple socialities are seen to influence the scope of their political engagement (Carlisle & Patton, 2013) or expressions of citizenship or civic values (Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2009; Ratto, Boler, & Deibert, 2014; Vromen, 2011). These forms of participation can also be understood to fuel racial, religious, and hate-based violence (Foxman & Wolf, 2013) or be structured by gender, class, and ethnic differences (boyd, 2011; Manjima, Birchall, Caro, Kelleher, & Vinita, 2013). The underlying message is that participation should be conceptualized in the context of how people interact with technology in everyday life. Rather than viewing technology as a democracy-enabling tool, people's online practices and interactions through the use of social and digital media are considered central to the process of political participation.

What is crucial to all these debates is the role of the digital technology itself, and in essence its mobile and social dimensions, without which people are unable to participate to the extent that they have been able to in contemporary politics. Through this conceptual lens, communication technologies are understood as valuable sources of power and counter-power for social change. Castells (2007) claims that interactive and digital networks of communication have caused the rise of a new form of 'mass self-communication', offering social movements the power to com-

municate and organize themselves on a large scale. Yet, Castells is perhaps overly confident in his view of technology and its capacity for democratic and revolutionary purposes. He does not acknowledge the complex relationship between online and offline spheres of engagement and sociality, the boundaries of which are often blurred, overlapping, and indeterminate. It is thus not surprising that Castells tends to focus more on democratic action rather than participatory activity. We suggest that a study of participatory action sheds light upon politics from the participants' point of view. This approach complicates the ways in which participants' political views may be shaped, influenced, and shared along online and offline sites of encounter. Power relationships are not simply shaped and defined in digital spaces alone, but rather in the complex interaction between physical and digital environments (e.g., Lim, 2006).

Castells' view, hence, tends to overlook the types of social relations that are forged across both physical and virtual environments. For Castells (2007), the medium itself does not create actual content but enables "unlimited diversity" and the "autonomous origin of most of the communication flows that construct . . . meaning in the public mind" (p. 248). Yet, by essentially dismissing offline and face-to-face communication mediums, and positioning the public as wholly passive, Castells credits digital technologies with disproportionate power. In this article, we adopt a different stance, shifting agency back to the participants and focusing on their online practices in order to understand the nature of their participation. This approach allows us to engage with the experiences of the women who are in the focus of our study. We construe their online expressions as political, even if their behavior and activities may not constitute 'full' or formal participation in political life because of the obvious lack of traditional forms of political participation, such as party membership. We suggest that broadening the notion of participation to incorporate any form of political discussion in the digital space effectively diversifies the concept of participation. Such a perspective additionally complicates the potential of technology as a democratic resource. The people, who access digital technology to join political discussions, are understood as political actors through which forms of participation can be measured and scrutinized. The participants provide a way through which we can read, describe, and interrogate the political action, calling the premise of earlier conceptualizations of participation into sharp refute.

### SITES OF PARADOX AND PROMISE

As noted above, in the digital era, there has been a shift away from construing political participation strictly within the official vernacular of politics. Women's political engagements in digital environments can be seen as constituting a form of political participation in its own right. Hence, such emergent practices invite us to modify earlier definitions of participation developed prior to the pervading of the Internet. In this article, we show how these online forms of participation were evidenced across a range of personal blogs, Facebook groups, and YouTube clips in both Thai and English language during the 2013/2014 Bangkok protests. We selected sites that included a social media platform, which allowed users to share, like, and comment on different topics, primarily women's issues. We looked at a cross-section of 100 of the most visited and popular websites, social media news coverage sites, and You-

Tube clips over a 12-month period as the 2013/2014 protests took place in Bangkok during the regency of Thailand's first female prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra (2011-2014). We used Google Analytics to determine the most popular sites visited, particularly selecting sites where participants were critical of Yingluck's leadership. Viewpoints were selected based on their capacity to trigger multiple and immediate responses on her leadership and policies, as well as on their ability to facilitate dialogue across different social networks. We chose not to discuss viewpoints that were supportive of Yingluck as they tended only to reinforce each other and more rarely elicited a dialogue. We found that sites critical of Yingluck, besides reinforcing one another, also generated extended discussions on her leadership and policies.<sup>1</sup> Data was analysed using an open source social network analysis tool called NodeXL, as a form of basic knowledge management. Where the identity of the person was known on these sites, we have included their name and gender. While we focused primarily on female commenters, in the few cases where a person's name was not published it was difficult to ascertain gender.

Acknowledging that Yingluck did not campaign on women's issues directly, we selected sites where women discussed Yingluck's policies and her leadership qualities, as this is where we found that much of the discussion was centered during the protests. We did not include Yingluck's Facebook page, which had garnered more than 2.5 million likes at that time, as we found that her Facebook page attracted only her supporters and showed less critical comment on her government. Examining how women discussed women's issues in relation to Yingluck's leadership led us to websites that carried significantly more dissenting views.

With more than 40% Internet penetration in its Northern and Central regions, Thailand is experiencing one of the fastest adoption of digital technologies in South-east Asia (Sureerat, 2012).<sup>2</sup> The rise of the Internet has transformed how people search for and share information, and thus altered Thailand's media ecologies, communicative processes, and modes of social and political organization. Our use of the term media ecologies resonates with Guattari's (2000) insistence to understand media and technology as intrinsically embedded in social relations, subjectivity, and the environment. We argue that Thai women are subverting the public/private sphere dichotomy through their multiple uses of technology. This suggests that the contemporary shifts between offline and online politics make it harder to contain notions

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1 We looked at both viewpoints critical of Yingluck and viewpoints that supported her; for our analysis of Thai women's online political participation we chose the former since the flow of conversation they created online appeared more interrogative, reflective, and analytical in tone. The latter did not produce the same kind of flow of conversation as respondents tended to only concur with or endorse one another.

2 NECTEC statistics indicate that Internet penetration in Thailand has grown exponentially with up to 38,015,725 users online (National Electronics and Computer Technology Center, n.d.). NECTEC's statistics indicate that Bangkok metropolitan areas have the highest rate of use with 56.3% of users residing in Bangkok. However, there were no major differences in the use of the Internet with regard to gender, with the exception of transgendered people who spent the most time online. While NECTEC's findings emphasize that communication via social networking sites is the most common activity by Thai users, it does not reveal how social networks are being used. ETDA's ICT report states that online use increased significantly between 2014 and 2015 (Electronic Transactions Development Agency & Ministry of Information and Communication Technology, 2016). The report notes that mobile devices are the most common way of accessing the Internet and the top three online activities of Internet users via mobile devices were communicating on social networks, web searching, and reading e-news.



of participation adequately within the strictures of the dominant political vernacular. Zizi Papacharissi (2015) highlights the value and importance of recognizing how personal expressions and experience in the digital figure as political. Discursive and affective expressions can “activate and sustain” a public or network by enabling and sharing feelings of belonging and solidarity (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 9). Such expressions can also influence the ways in which protests and political issues are framed by providing alternative accounts and experiences of events, thus questioning and contradicting the dominant narrative promoted by mainstream media. For Papacharissi (2015), “affective attunement” describes “liking a post on Facebook, . . . uploading and sharing a YouTube video, or using a meme generator to create and share a simple message” as “indicative of civic intensity and thus a form of engagement” (p. 25). She recognizes that in repressive regimes, citizens require courage to express views and opinions that disagree, undermine, and defy the ruling force; hence, their views become political simply by being voiced. This political dimension is significant because the actions of a group can then be situated across new conceptual frameworks for determining the rules of engagement.

### THAI WOMEN'S POLITICAL VOICES

Yingluck Shinawatra came to power after a landslide victory in the 2011 Thai general elections. Her key campaign message at that time (in the aftermath of an extended series of political protests during the period from 2008 to 2010) was one of poverty eradication, corporate income tax reduction, and national reconciliation. Prior to her election, the government led by the Democrat Party incited anger amongst protesters who believed the group had masterminded a controversial legal and military move to establish governance. Protests escalated when attempts to negotiate a ceasefire failed and forced a military crackdown, seeing more than 100 people killed and thousands of others injured in the ensuing violent confrontations. The protesters included the *National United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship* (UDD), also known as the ‘Red Shirts’, which called for an early election and demanded that the government stand down.

On a website that documents the top 10 worst prime ministers in the world, Yingluck rates a close second to her brother Thaksin who is rated first. Most of the comments on this English-language site highlight her simple-mindedness, heartlessness, or inability to lead the country:

She is the most stupid prime minister. The worst is that she has not done anything to help the country since she became PM.

Well.. How can I put this.. She can't even speak her native language properly. Do not mention about her English skill. I still wonder what does ‘Thank you three time’ mean and how can she graduate from the Univ. from USA.. She rarely play her role. Skipping meeting is her hobby and cry in front of public is her only one specialty.. She does make the woman's pride down. Just show her face and read the script is her job, I guess?



People think Yingluck is stupid, but in fact, she is a brutal and cruel person from her command to kill people every night during the Bangkok Shutdown when they sleep on the road. These people do not have any weapon, but only whistle. Yingluck is Satan on earth. Thailand will be bankrupted soon if she continues to stay in Thailand . . . .

On this particular site, the public is encouraged to leave messages expressing their opinion of Yingluck and whether they agree or disagree with other commenters' viewpoints. Visitors to the site can vote either by ticking the thumbs-up image in support of the comment or thumbs-down to state their rejection of the claims. Some of the comments received an enormous number of supporters (anywhere from 3,000 to more than a million thumbs-up votes). Followers of the page are also able to share the website using Twitter or Facebook. The sharing and endorsement of people's opinions about Yingluck highlights the sense of freedom people felt to express their views candidly. The above comments clearly illustrate that the participants were not afraid to criticize and speak out against Yingluck. This type of peer endorsement of information and opinions can be understood as a means through which people develop their political identities and consciousness. This site offered an unconventional space for people to speak out against their leader without censorship. We suggest that it is reflective of an emerging political sphere of public agitation and discontent, providing an alternative space for citizens to share a collective and public display of dissatisfaction and protest.

While it is obvious from these comments that Yingluck was not a favored prime minister, there is also no doubt that her rise to power was set against a complex political backdrop. Controversy surrounded her government from the outset, with some protesters claiming she was simply a puppet for her brother and former prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, who (at the time of writing this article) faced corruption charges and was living in self-imposed exile in Dubai. In much of the commentary analyzed across the 100 sites, people accused her of acting as a political proxy for her brother:

[Yingluck] just follows her brother order, Thaksin Shinawatra, to achieve authority, asset and etc. by corruption.

She do everything what her brother said (Thaksin Shinawatra). She doesn't know what's right and wrong and totally can't think by herself.

Bad like her brother go to hell.

These comments encapsulated the rising discontent toward Yingluck's leadership during the time she was in office. They indicate that people were undaunted by her power and felt defiant enough to express their views in a relatively public forum. The language is expressive, colorful, and often vitriolic and malicious. The comments reflect a public who were unconcerned about speaking their minds freely, and who would not hold back their anger, disappointment, frustration, and cynicism. We propose that such comments constitute a new form of political participation because

such views convey a political standpoint that has the potential to influence a wider audience through politically persuasive commentary. The comments colored the tone of the debate around Yingluck's leadership in ways in which debates between political leaders have not been able to accomplish among the general populace. Additionally, the further sharing and endorsing of these views, within the above mentioned sites and on other platforms, helped to raise political consciousness about the extent of public agitation. What was obvious on these sites was the number of participants endorsing such messages. The content of the messages might not have been assigned the same kind of attention or coverage in mainstream media outlets, and yet it was expressive of a public clearly prepared to engage in political dialogue. While the level of engagement through sharing and liking posts may not seem particularly surprising, in the context of a totalitarian state, speaking out against the ruling authority by endorsing and spreading opposing views online embodies an additional layer of citizen resistance that is a feature of digital life in Western democracies that is taken for granted.

Most of the sites in this study were extremely active during the 12-month period of analysis and tended to peak in activity during major protests that occurred in the physical setting of Bangkok's streets, which were also instances of greater media coverage (local, regional, and global). In fact, most of the sites studied were not only critical of Yingluck's leadership but also accused her of abusing her family connections. Similarly, during his term in office, Thaksin's opponents accused him of corruption and nepotism, while his government was charged with dictatorship, human rights abuses, and hostility toward free press. Yingluck's own rule was shrouded in political unrest and protests. As one social media user puts it:

Her government implemented many destructive policies to the country, e.g. the rice policy, the highest corruptions in all gov projects, parliamentary dictatorship, denial of the Constitution.

Other citizens, who discussed Yingluck's policies, have either expressed their opinions about how she might make Thailand a better country for women or raised doubts about her capacity to do so.

She might bring in more women's rights. A lot of women suffer domestic abuse and rape; I hope she can improve the situation. (Sukhpatra Chockmo, female)<sup>3</sup>

She cannot be a representative of women's groups, because she has never expressed her vision and stance regarding the protection of women's interests. (Virada Somswadi, female, founder of the Women's Studies program, Chiang Mai University)<sup>4</sup>

These comments articulated perspectives that were quite critical of the government, but they also expressed a level of discontent about women's rights and position

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3 See Branigan, 2011.

4 See Branigan, 2011.

in Thailand's social system. It is interesting that in this case one of the comments was by a Thai academic. This demonstrated how women were able to use social and digital media as an extension of their offline identities. The sites provided another space and avenue for women to share information, project their voices, and connect with a wider community they may not have had access to in the offline realm. In some cases, female members of protest groups were using blogs and the commenting features of popular sites to promote and generate public support for their causes, providing another example of how women were using social and digital media to extend their reach (SPH Razor, 2013).

These comments followed a larger pattern found on other social media sites, suggesting a general and mixed sense of both hopefulness and despair that Yingluck's leadership induced in Thai women. Those who supported her pledged their devotion, loyalty, and obligation toward her. Several women in leadership positions, like Thida Tawornseth, chairwoman of the Red Shirts, complimented Yingluck on her response to the flood crisis, which hit Thailand during her government:

The government was not a one-man show, a team of principled people should help the leader make the right decisions. (Thida Tawornseth, female, Red Shirts chairwoman)<sup>5</sup>

However, further statements observing Yingluck's management of Thailand politics at the time suggested that she was being drowned out by other political voices. For instance, Chalidaporn Songsamphan, a professor of Gender Studies at Thammasat University, stated that Yingluck was midway between passing and failing her test in politics:

Several issues pending since before the election remain undecided. She should be more independent and more forthcoming about her intentions, particularly in regard to solving the divisions in the country. It is impossible to identify any of her visions about the issues and other people tend to dominate political directions. (Chalidaporn Songsamphan, female, professor of Gender Studies, Thammasat University)<sup>6</sup>

The comments by academics, women's rights groups, and similar organizations with a social justice agenda played an important role in conveying alternative perspectives that may not necessarily have been picked up by the mainstream media. This point supports our contention that the spheres of online and offline politics are complementary to one another. According to Piela (2015), digital media can act as a facilitator of grassroots causes but can also provide an interpretative context for political acts themselves. In other words, people who represent various interest groups carry a key role in reading and interpreting the political landscape. They use social and digital media to show audiences the different angles through which the political

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<sup>5</sup> See SPH Razor, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> See SPH Razor, 2013; see also Chalidaporn Songsamphan's personal blog at <http://chalidaporn.blogspot.com.au/>.

situation can be analyzed, and particularly how the existing political and social landscape contains implications for women.

A fresh outbreak of political violence continued in Thailand during November 2013, focused on removing the influence of Thaksin from Thai politics. Among other demands, the protests were triggered by a proposed amnesty bill, which would have pardoned political offences dating back to the 2006 coup, potentially quashing the corruption conviction of people who had been involved in political violence, including Thaksin Shinawatra.

Yingluck's 3-year term in office could be described as nothing short of contentious. In May 2014 and as the military coup ensued, Yingluck's government was swiftly turned over under claims that she abused her power to benefit her party and family. However, she continued to generate widespread support from both her direct fan base and other segments of Thai society, many of whom were captured on video pledging their commitment to and admiration for her (AP Archive, 2015). Other people directly endorsed Yingluck's Facebook page, which remained very active at that time with thousands of her followers pledging their support, while her profile in the political realm remained controversial. She faced further charges under Thailand's *National Anti-Corruption Commission* for allegedly mishandling a loss-making subsidy scheme for rice farmers. This multi-billion dollar scheme was popular in Thailand's rural rice-farming provinces in the North and Northeast, and helped Yingluck win the votes of millions of farmers when she came to power in 2011. Reports of corruption, negligence, and mismanagement plunged the policy into strife and forced the government to find measures to stem ballooning losses estimated at USD 6 billion. Despite her exile from government, these issues continued to garner widespread attention across a range of social and digital media platforms. This active online environment laid bare the participation of dispersed and divided female publics whose political perspectives were both shared and contested.

### REDEFINING PARTICIPATION THROUGH WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

How are we to view this participatory behavior in a contemporary context, given that women in Thailand are generally excluded from participating in political dialogue, and are cut off from voicing their concerns in traditional media spaces, such as television news reports, radio, and print publications? Social media and other online channels provide an alternative medium for women to voice such concerns directly, whilst remaining anonymous if they choose to and without the need to justify themselves. We have shown how this digital environment nurtured an expressive space that welcomed and included different viewpoints about the social and political issues of the day. While it is harder to ascertain whether these same women, presenting their viewpoints online, were the ones who took to the streets to protest, what is pertinent here is that the digital space provided a connection to an alternative form of engagement with political life. No matter how arbitrary or tentative this connection and engagement is, what we are presented with here is a sphere of influence, with members of the public clearly expressing their shared or oppositional views, reinforcing their own and endorsing those of others. The women who posted a comment and those who responded were not always necessarily articulate, clear about their

political intentions, or politically correct in their use of language – yet what could be observed was a sense of freedom and directness in their views. This was evidence of a cogent and compelling political debate circulating in the everyday lives of women in Thailand.

This is a noteworthy context given that women's participation in politics is often viewed as a reduced space of political activity. Some writers have discussed this space as hostile or one that affords few entitlements. The suggestion is that women are largely excluded from participating in formal political arenas. As Harris (2008) contends, "young women are underrepresented in many conventional forms of political practice . . . and are less entitled to participate in formal political activities" (p. 487). Yet, Harris (2004, 2006) along with others has shown how female participants have utilized digital technologies in new and experimental ways (Haraway, 1985; Keller, 2012; Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007; Offen, 1988; Tarrow, 1989).<sup>7</sup> Such uses suggest a new kind of politics is being performed online, but the relationships and disparities between these kinds of informal and formal politics are still being realized.

This observation about women's political agency has continued to lend understanding to emerging conceptualizations of participation. Piela (2015) writes of the gendered uses of technology for Muslim women and those who identify as activists. She argues that the Internet provides a platform for the development of gendered interpretations of Islamic scriptures and that these alternative readings challenge patriarchal conventions. Piela views the Internet as a 'facilitator' of women's collaborative and interpretative practices, both online and in connection with their face-to-face grassroots activities. Online spaces, she believes, are valuable for Muslim women because grassroots women are largely excluded from any decision-making in Islamic religious structures (Piela, 2015, p. 274).

This idea strikes a chord with other researchers who concur that the digital enacts inclusivity. Newsom and Lengel's (2012) analysis of Arab feminist activism during the protests in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011 illustrates how women used social and digital media to construct and broadcast their own voices and experiences. However, while digital acts formed an inclusive and shared space for women to express their views, there were certain limits to their voices. Although the online "third space" offered Arab women a space for activism, it was essentially a "space of contained empowerment" (Newsom & Lengel, 2012, p. 32). In other words, women were able to participate in the political dialogue, but their messages had only a limited power since they could be reframed and watered down once the mainstream media remediates them as news stories for wider public consumption.

Despite these limitations, a number of scholars assert that the social networking capacity of social and digital media cannot be underestimated. Women are willing

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7 Feminist activists typically engage with social and digital media to create "unregulated, public spaces for peer communities and to construct public selves" (Harris, 2004, p. 492). Both the Red Shirt and Yellow Shirt Facebook pages represent public spaces for activists and supporters to engage with each other and establish online communities. The Red Shirt Facebook page has a reach of over 20,000 Facebook users and the Yellow Shirt Facebook page has over 4,000 likes. Many of the posts are shared, which indicates messages reach further than explicitly stated. The page also incorporates posts by participants and individual members, showing their support by posting their own messages about the cause. The sharing of posts and the contribution of posts helps increase the scale and reach of the groups' social media presence, effectively increasing awareness about their cause.

to risk political retribution because their ability to discuss political issues with other citizens creates a sense of belonging. Touria Khannous (2011, p. 359) argues that while Facebook and blogs allow women a space to speak freely and initiate social change, the international response to their social media use has taken on an arguably higher importance than the blogs themselves. Social networking tools have allowed Muslim women to develop their own direct and uncensored messages and help position the women and their political agendas directly on the global stage. Arab feminism, Khannous (2011) contends, has had a socially transformative impact on women's lives because of the unprecedented number of Muslim networks that have developed and flourished in the light of social and digital media. Khannous emphasizes how virtual spaces provide a liberating medium for Muslim women to express themselves as they endure restraints imposed on them by their respective government. Online forums enable Moroccan and Saudi feminists to discuss issues of femininity, raise religious questions, and learn about cultural differences, despite the risks they face offline.

The development of research, which is located outside the Western feminist context or that focuses on gendered forms of technology use, reveals the growing interest in how women of color, minorities, or women who are socially, politically, or religiously marginalized are increasingly finding alternative avenues to form social networks and influence formal politics. Looking at this research, we have sought to highlight the largely deficient body of research on women's political participation in Thailand, and to explore the implications of participation scholarship for Thai women's political experiences. Women's voices and viewpoints in Thailand have remained silenced in most traditional media, yet Thai women have used a range of social and digital media to discuss their political standpoints, publicly sharing and exchanging their political perspectives during the protests. These digital environments were unregulated, largely open networks, and involved no or little moderation by system administrators. Users could therefore create content dynamically and establish a flow of direct and pervasive communication with a broad, diverse, and unknown public.

By incorporating these Thai women's perspectives, we argue for new modes of conceiving women's engagement in politics in ways that move beyond conventional descriptions of political participation. The women's online discussions constituted a form of 'action' and engagement that might not traditionally be understood as a conventional political stance in prevailing definitions of participatory politics. These sites offered an unconventional space of political discourse that not only reflected Thai women's political perspectives, but also their capacity to debate political issues and share these perspectives with other like-minded women experiencing similar conditions. These online forms were unconventional in terms of how they were defined as distinct sites that enable alternative expressions of political identities and perspectives. They are also unconventional insofar as they deviate from traditional offline or face-to-face political environments where women are unwelcome or excluded from participating in political processes. Our use of Thailand as a case study suggests that these unconventional forms of participation have a further bearing on how citizens spread their political messages, and connect with others concerning their everyday anxieties. These participatory forms are indicative of a public in which women's voices, images, and collective experiences can be examined outside the established parameters of conventional politics.



## CONCLUSION

The politics of participation is a lively terrain. Although much attention has been placed on the role of social and digital media in mass events across the Arab world, parts of Europe, and the USA, their role and impact in Southeast Asian contexts have been largely neglected. This article sought to highlight how the rise of social and digital media has altered what it means to participate politically. By calling attention to Thai women's engagement in a specific political context, our aim was to illustrate how a range of different online platforms were being utilized for participatory politics. We focused on participants' online interaction and commentary to legitimize Thai women's political engagement. This approach not only conveyed the extent to which digital media platforms were being used for political engagement, but also assisted us to critically investigate the nature of online participation in Thailand. We found that social and digital media users were not afraid to speak out about their discontent with the government during Bangkok's 2013/2014 protests. These participants appeared to have no fear of reprisal or retribution. Furthermore, there existed an active practice of sharing and endorsing people's opinions; the sheer volume of this sharing, liking, endorsing, and commenting was clearly visible in terms of numbers. Furthermore, many sites also included the participant's name, profile, and affiliation.

These practices encourage us to revise current definitions of political participation by accounting for the new constituents of participatory activities beyond conventional politics. The range of women's comments across the Internet and social media sites was indicative of the complex political discussions taking place within online groups and communities. The commentary expressed a range of attitudes, which were supported, shared, and contested. The participation and comments by academics and women's organizations illustrate how digital media were used as an extension to offline activities, protests, and political agendas. These commenters fueled, supported, and reinforced the opinions of other participants across a range of social media sites. Commentary merged with other perspectives and became part of a larger whole, making it difficult to ascertain the original source of debates and breaking the rules that define engagement along traditional thresholds.

The speed, scale, and nature of Internet-based discussion sites create an efficient manner for women's organizations to communicate, push their agenda, and influence public opinions and activities. While there are challenges in tracing the relationship between online and offline activities, what we have shown is that traditional face-to-face political modes of engagement have been complicated by digital environments, particularly as they interact with the changing media ecologies of the 21st century. Social and digital media draw attention to alternative spaces for discussing the issues of social concern and reflect the multiple ways in which women engage in politics in non-traditional ways. This understanding is important because women in Thailand may not necessarily engage or have opportunities to directly participate in conventional politics. Some may have no interest in following conventional politics, yet may be quite outspoken when it comes to conversing with others about their political stance, be it with work colleagues, friends, or family, or as in this case with an unknown public. A closer examination of these sites has allowed us to trace the range of perspectives commenters from Thailand had about Yingluck's politics and



the political climate for women's participation during her regency. Such ruminations reconfigure the conceptual frame for understanding who participants are, how they participate, and what this may imply in the context of women's political situation and experiences in Southeast Asia. Analysis of such experiences carry political consequences for engaging with media ecologies in flux, and for understanding the ongoing history of women's political oppression and resistance across Asia.



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